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An archival feminist pedagogy: unlearning and objects as affective knowledge companions

Running heads:

Continuum

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Abstract

This paper is based on workshops conducted with students at Bristol University with some of the materials from the Feminist Archive South. We explore how the sensory wonder of the archives enriched and reshaped the practice of feminist pedagogy especially with regard to the interface between ontology and epistemology. We argue that the feminist archive is an important resource which incites us to shift our focus on the process of knowledge production as stories encountered in the archive can challenge the authority and coherence of dominant feminist stories. This can produce feelings of disorientation which act as important moments through which different kinds of feminist knowledge can emerge. Our approach places feelings at the centre of encounters with knowledge because of the mutual entanglement of thinking and feeling rendered salient in the feminist archive. Finally, these processes facilitate different kinds of student–teacher collaboration, with students positioned as co-researchers working to document and interpret the feelings, knowledge and transformations that emerge from the encounter-with the feminist archive. The objects we encountered worked as knowledge companions to stimulate collaborative (un)learning and to produce unique forms of affective knowledge.

Introduction

AQ4 In this paper, we reflect on our practice of using feminist archives to teach feminist history and theory, examining what such *experiences* can offer feminist pedagogy and epistemology. Experience, a peculiarly feminized and feminist site of knowledge production, often so mistrusted for its partiality and propensity to go ‘too far’ (Pereira 2012), within the feminist archive engenders a ‘kind of dissociation or rupture, as it were, in our habitual representations of the world’ (Pihlainen 2012, 325). We want to highlight in particular the importance of archival objects as *knowledge companions* that can help facilitate different ways of thinking and being in the classroom (and in the feminist archive), arising from processes of ‘thinking-with’ the material encountered there (Turtle 2007; Puig de la Bellacasa 2012, 199; Bartlett and Henderson 2013). In doing so, we draw on, and contribute to, a growing interest in mapping out the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things, exploring what emerges through the ‘proximity opened up by the archive’ (Eichorn 2013, 60, our italics).

The foregrounding of affective and emotional responses in this article, as they emerge *through* the archival-learning encounter, builds on previous work that ‘feels’ women’s liberation differently. As Victoria Hesford argues, *how* we encounter the material in the feminist archive is affectively conditioned by ‘screen memor[ies] that works to contain and displace our knowledge’ (2013, 16) about the histories of the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM). To put it another way, strong preconceptions pre-exist our encounter with the feminist archive, and these feelings orient readers to the feminist archive in particular ways. Uncovering or tracking these feelings is a pedagogical exercise in itself, of course, that we can only begin to gesture towards in the writing below.

The Feminist Archive South

We focus in this paper on our pedagogical engagements with a particular *feminist* archive: the Feminist Archive South (FAS), established in 1978 and currently housed at Special Collections at the University of Bristol, in the South-West of England. The FAS began as the archival seed of one woman’s personal collection, and subsequently expanded and outgrew various locations in the region. Before moving to its current institutional location in 2008, the archive was stored in the back room of a public library, open by appointment one afternoon a week. The move to the University of Bristol was made to safeguard the collection, and ensure it was looked after by trained archive professionals rather than committed, enthusiastic volunteers. We

emphasize this archival location because although certain aspects of our argument may well be generalizable, and applied to work with other collections, we want to be clear that we are talking about a specific material place where *some* of the vast mnemotechnical (Stiegler 1998) resources of the WLM (temporalized by the FAS's creators as c.1960–2000) are stored and preserved. Such clarity about which feminist archive we are referring to is even more pressing given how what is meant by the term 'archive' has undergone significant transformation in the past 20 years. This is due in part to the 'archival turn' in critical theory at large, whose insights are too numerous to discuss here in detail, but infuse our orientations as practitioners, teachers and researchers (Derrida 1994; Stoler 2010). Another significant context is the impact of digital technologies which have instated archival metaphors and practices as central to everyday life in the twenty-first century, as well as reconfiguring the very meaning of the archive (Eichorn 2008; Grubbs 2014; Owens 2014).

Drawing attention to the *material* place where our knowledge and learning occurs is also done to highlight how *our* access to the contents of FAS is subject to certain conditions. In particular, the fact that a significant amount of FAS collection is not catalogued to folder level means that detailed and remotely accessible knowledge of what is in the archive is currently not possible. In a recent funding bid the FAS collection, which is comprised of a number of series, was described as follows:

- (1)
Archive Boxes: currently underused because of their poor cataloguing (128 in total).
- (2)
Topic Boxes (157 in total).
- (3)
Pamphlet Boxes (90 in total).
- (4)
Bristol City Council Women's Unit (43 in total).
- (5)
Periodicals (631 magazine boxes), used widely so detailed cataloguing required.
- (6)
Printed books (21 shelves).

While the limited catalogue does create the opportunity for novel forms of engagement when ordering items to view, namely courting speculation and making educated guesses about 'what is in the box?', it does have a real, longer term impact on how widespread the institutional and community use of the FAS can be, and its position within the field of feminist knowledge production more generally. As Eichorn suggests, 'item-level cataloguing of marginal materials holds more potential for subversion than simply digitizing the same material' (2013, 23). There is not much use in having an amazing archive (and the FAS *is* amazing in breadth and depth), in other words, if it is not easy to access. Easy to access does not mean here, as Eichorn suggests, digitizing the archive's contents, but ensuring it is properly catalogued in a detailed manner appropriate to the needs of the collection and its user communities. For our purposes however, as we move through a process of thinking-with the archive, recording responses in the contingent historical temporalities we are inhabiting, navigating the archive's contents with the existing catalogue means there will always be surprises, and things we cannot possibly know in advance of what we find there. The specific details of the 'national and international material relating to the history of feminism, c.1960–2000 which includes: periodicals, books, pamphlets, diaries, calendars, conference papers, personal letters, photographs, stickers, postcards, drawings, posters, banners, badges, vinyl records, mini-disks, audio cassettes, video cassettes, a 16mm film, clothing, digitised audio and film and various other ephemera'¹ is there to be discovered (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Part of the Feminist Archive South collection ready for discovery. Image by Deborah Withers.

academic feminist storytelling outlined by Hemmings, mean that we do not, and cannot, turn towards the feminist archive in a neutral manner.

As feminist pedagogues and inheritors of this (somewhat discredited) legacy, we go to the archive to confront precisely *what we do not know about feminist history*. We attempt, as far as possible, to leave pre-conceptions at the door – or at least enter knowing we have them – understanding that when we engage with archive material, a different kind of knowledge is opened up. This different kind of knowledge can, potentially, track the assumptions and techniques that regulate what we think we know already about feminist history. The feminist archive becomes a space for radical **AQ6** *unlearning* (Dunne and O’ Rourke 2014), where the dissonance between myopia and material evidence produces incommensurable cracks that can pierce the coherency of short-hand explanations and simplistic abstractions. Sucked in, punctuated by the bumpy grain of what we find, unlearning occurs through what Ann Laura Stoler calls ‘archival events’, those

moments that disrupt (if only provisionally) a field of force, that challenge (if only slightly) what can be said and done, that question (if only quietly) “epistemic warrant”, that realign the certainties of the probable more than they mark wholesale reversals of direction (2010, 51).

Our movement into the archive is unconditioned by disciplinary methodologies – about the correct way to research and behave in the feminist archive. Neither of us is a trained historian, which means that our encounter with artefacts is guided principally by our intuition. Hence, we are confronted with the necessity to improvise rather than stay fixed to learned practice. We do know, however, that we do not know what to expect, and therefore remain open to discovering more, challenging the discipline of received wisdom and reading, looking, listening and touching carefully.

We go to the archive with the desire to make different spaces for teaching women’s studies and feminism. We emphasize Eros as a productive force in the feminist classroom that does not negate the embodied character of student and teacher’s relations and provides an epistemological grounding for self-actualization (hooks 1994; McWilliam 1996). hooks emphasizes the liberatory potential of such teaching to open up different worlds and different ways of being: ‘to provide students with ways of knowing that enables them to know themselves better and live in the world more fully’ (194). Our specific contribution to rethinking pedagogic relations is to explore the transformation of the student–teacher interaction through our joint encounters with material things in the archive. What happens when there is *something* in between us is one of the questions we address.

Feelings in the feminist archive are central to our analysis because the materials act as ‘repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded *not* in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception’ (Cvetkovich 2003, 7). Furthermore, as Margaretta Jolly has argued, women’s liberation emerged as an epistolary culture that idealistically fashioned the feminist subject as relational and caring. This was realized not only in letter correspondence between women, but also in the ‘homegrown’ feminist press and media, which comprised of letters to feminist publications, the content of newsletters and the culture of the ‘open letter’ used to communicate personal–political issues of collective importance to the wider movement. Significantly, this ethics of care endured in the movement even when political and personal differences appeared insurmountable. Nevertheless, Jolly writes, women ‘*continued to expect care from one another*’ (Jolly 2008, 3–12, italics in original). It is impossible, therefore, *not* to encounter *very strong* feelings in the feminist archive, whether that be through reading harrowing accounts of childbirth and the treatment of women’s bodies by the medical establishment in the late 1960s, rousing pamphlets, frustrated ‘internal’ communication about movement working processes or reports from conferences that did not go as planned: ‘we don’t get together enough to deal with these conflicts, to have these discussions, so that in a conference such as this one it can be used as a dumping ground for the anger and hurt we may get as a result of patriarchy’ (Kelly 1990, 8, see also Withers 2012). Rather than contain the affective intensities and dislocations that occur when we engage with the feminist archive, we want to retain the possibility that when the archive is opened, it may open *us* in unexpected, yet theoretically and pedagogically rich, ways.

Such embodied teaching requires shifting from the long-standing dualisms in Western thought between Reason and Emotion. Reason is a fantasy that invokes both dreams of mastery/domination and dreams of pleasure in being the ‘reasonable person’, a person who is in love with ideas rather than bodies and can triumph over the contingency of the body and the unreasonableness of the emotions (Sofia 1993, 29). The fantasy of the rational individual is especially problematic for teaching because it is established by splitting off, or even rejecting, certain human capabilities. However, finding an alternative mode of pedagogy that valorizes emotions and attachment can produce other fantasies that are just as problematic for women as those traditional to the university. The teacher, for example, who is ‘infinitely patient, available, confident in her knowledge, an intellectual and sexual role model, who uses her long office hours therapeutically to help students develop subjectivity and self-esteem and to solve personal problems’ (Berlant 1997, 147). Rather than being caught in this bind, we want to find a way of thinking with and through emotions and archives as a feminist pedagogy. Moreover, our discussion points to the importance of collaborative learning: we do this as a way of de-centring the fiction of the autonomous scholar through an encounter with anonymously yet collectively authored archive materials. Drawing on Freirean principles that seek to disrupt the operations of power hierarchies inside and outside the classroom, feminist pedagogy is concerned with countering anti-oppressive practice and seeks to bring the teacher and the student in a co-relationship of exploration: this displaces the model of the passive learner who is handed the knowledge from the educator. Specifically, we want to extend this question of interdependency to the non-human realm of objects and how it reconfigures the relational space

of feminist pedagogy.

Unlearning together: collaborative knowledges

Encountering the feminist archive can be an uncomfortable yet pedagogically enriching experience for teachers. One of us wrote:

The sound of the archive was thump-like for me, yet it was telling me louder something I already knew, namely that the story that the global women's movement was not something which developed 'after' the black and postcolonial critiques of 'second wave feminism'. In the texts I was randomly allocated in one of the workshops I read in feminist newspapers from the 70s and 80s of how women organized transnationally across many different sites: from wages for housework campaigns to the representation of women in the media, to pit closures. Some of these struggles were clearly informed by anti-imperialist perspectives and infused with Marxist thought. Evidence, right there. My fantasy that global sisterhood only became possible through online activism and critical reflections on differences between women was ruptured then: the neat narrative of 'progress' which I have found impossible not to repeat properly was shaken out from these fragments in a way which no journal article making the same argument could do. Caught out red-handed as an occasional re-teller of these easy shortcut tales, this unlearning stung, opening up new vistas in its wake.

This encounter unsettles certainties about who is the appropriate knower and whose knowledge counts. Yet, it also makes space for a different kind of pedagogic encounter: One where we might take risks because we do not know and we are not in control of the learning encounter or outcome. Letting go of some of our certainties also makes space for knowledge practices that shift relations between students and teachers so that they can collaborate. What happens when we share with our students that *we did not know*? Once we open this vulnerability, a more ethical bond between us can potentially start to grow, a space where we might unlearn together rather than transmit neat narratives.

Such disorientating encounters in the feminist archive issue forth more than provisional, slight or even quiet challenges. Given the marginality of feminist archival resources within the wider field of feminist knowledge production, these meetings with archival materials carry important implications. They demand the question: what *do we do* with the knowledge encountered there? What do we do when we listen to Bristol-based artist and activist Pat VT West recount her memory of the 1972 National Women's Liberation Conference in Acton when 'we' have been told that (trans) gender issues were anathema to the women's movement.

[we] were fed up with how women were looking so went as elegant men in drag. We drove up to Delamere Services and changed into drag in the women's changing rooms. We went in as women and came out as men. And drove into London. I looked particularly good. I did look very much like a man in drag. Jackie had a strange demeanour too. She could be very silly. I was more serious than her.

How were you received in drag? (interviewer).

We were turned away! We were told the conference was dealing with the issues of gender. *There were some real transgender people there. This whole issue was a burning issue at the conference.* They let us in in the end as someone knew who we were. We thought that was wonderful. We tried to bring out these issues. What does it mean to be a feminist anyway? Do you have to dress in dungarees, sensible shoes and not wear make up? We did loads of guerrilla warfare. *Questioning. The women's movement [was] all about gender* (2000).

Such encounters necessarily instate a profound hesitation, a consequence of confronting the irresolvable disjunction between inherited knowledge and archival trace. This breakdown can, however, open space for thoughts, feelings and reflections to emerge-with the archival material, whereby contradictions and the irreconcilable become an inherent part of the learning encounter. In the feminist archive, we therefore shift pedagogy from studying the finished object of knowledge (the story we know already, transmitted without friction) to understanding the *processes* of *how* feminist knowledge is constructed, with all of the necessary fissures and cracks. These are unique time-space-feelings created in order to learn, be and know differently. We dive into the (relative) mess of folders and boxes that have been partially catalogued because of limited financial resources. We feel infinitely grateful for the wisdom of those women who thought that it was important to collect the material together so that feminism's cultural, political, activist and intellectual heritage can be activated at a different point in historical time, a time we nonetheless share through the 'time of the trace,' as Victoria Browne's outlining of the 'polytemporal' quality of historical time reminds us (2014).

Perhaps, there is the danger that the feminist archive is presented here as a redemptive space for feminist knowledge. It is not – it is simply a pedagogical and epistemological resource, 'a historiographic technology' whose function can be reparative (Eichorn 2013, 99). Like any archive it needs to be *used*.⁴ Every archive, perhaps, has its day; where the untimely become timely because 'nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history'. (Benjamin 1977, 257) Working collaboratively with students and feminist archives can help displace some of the definitive grand narratives about feminism's past, and shift some of the hierarchies between students and teachers which are usually reproduced in the making of histories, where the teacher is the expert and the student is the one who does not know. Exploring the collisions of multiple feminist histories helps decentre stories

that operate as epistemic certainties. The learning then becomes focused on the process – on *how* we make (knowledge from) history, rather than the object in itself. This pedagogy assumes students are more than active learners who can interpret and organize different types of evidence, be it archival or other, they also open up the possibility of unlearning too. The physical pulling together and apart of materials can potentially help us to refuse the compulsion to construct further stories in our teaching and knowledge production activities. Instead we revel together in the messiness of feminist histories, their fragmentary quality and their unfinished, on-going struggles. The multiplicity of form and content encountered in the feminist archive and the intrinsically contributive feel of a social movement archive with various authors – anonymous, collective and named – renders this process infinitely more possible. As film-maker-theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha explains, it is possible to engender interpretive conditions that can resist simplistic modes of representation implicit to the act of narrativization:

You start out with a story and you realize, as it unfolds, that there's not really a story [...] The thread created moves forward criss-crossed and interlaced by other threads until it breaks with its own linearity; and hence a story is told mainly to say that there is no story – only a complex tightly knit tissue of activities and events that have single no explanation, as in life (1997, 95).

Trinh's refusal of re-telling singular stories offers a way to be oriented towards the multitude of activities and events that are there to be encountered in the feminist archive, more or less knit together. The student as knowledge opener rather than knowledge consumer–producer, can then shift from asking not only 'what happened', but also 'how has it been remembered', and what meaning she can make from it in the here and now, because such different interpretations matter.

Feeling/knowing differently: touching wonders

We contend that the archive's materiality harbours wondrous qualities, which facilitates encounters with feminist cultural memory that have an affective-sensory dimension. The wonder of the feminist archives as we experience it is not romanticized or nostalgic, but rather resides in the painful dimension of encountering new knowledge. Sara Ahmed similarly describes this moment of critical engagement as wondrous yet uncomfortable, emerging from an affective realization that *this matters* – a spark – a moment of conscientization which gives rise to new insights. Conscientization is the most personal part of critical thinking, when we are most *affected* by learning, when the new knowledge becomes anchored deep inside our head/bodies so that our whole world (view) shifts:

For me the politics of teaching women's studies, in which feminist pedagogy becomes a form of activism as a way of 'being moved' has been bound up with wonder, with engendering a sense of surprise about how it is that the world has come to take the shape that it has. Feminist teaching begins with that opening, that pause or hesitation that refuses the taken for granted to be granted. [...] It is through wonder that pain and anger come to life, as wonder allows us to notice what hurts, what causes pain and we feel to be wrong, is not necessary and can be unmade as well as made. (Ahmed 2008, 250)

If wonder is what activates conscientization, then where and in what circumstances might such encounters happen? As Kaulingfreks, Spoelstraand, and ten Bos (2011) note, the loss of wonder within organizations and museums is directly linked to the development of scientific methods of classification and the appearance of categories such as the manager, the professional, the expert and the knowledge worker. Hence, we are interested in the capacity of this archive to re-enchant rather disenchant feminist knowledge at a time when the increasing turn to measure and quantify 'outputs' within higher education risks squashing out the wonder of teaching, learning researching and discovering *together*. Although the idea of wonder runs through very different philosophical traditions from Plato to Heidegger, which do not necessarily equate wonder with curiosity or amazement, we are focusing on its capacity for generating affective openings:

To wonder is to experience wounds in the sense of *remaining open* and vulnerable [...] When a wonder happens and immediately disappears, we can still wonder through our 'wounds' [...] Wonders wound us; they cut through the fabric of our sense of reality leaving a trace of undecidability, opening up our actualised world. (Kaulingfreks, Spoelstraand, and ten Bos 2011, 318)

Wondering then is to affectively think up, move within and between different worlds. To feel or to sense is also to imagine how things might be different:

A feminist lecturer sits annotating essay scripts trying to find new ways to explain to students that they need to deepen their 'critical engagement' She wonders where this engagement might come from, and what brings it into being. Struck by how flat some of the writing feels, she mulls over what might provoke their imagination. She fantasizes that the archives could provide this missing energy, bring about this enlivening.

The encounter with the feminist archive brings students into physical contact with different kinds of feminism, largely unmediated and unauthorized by the teacher unlike the texts usually selected for them to read. We discover the archives for the first time side by side, and temporarily escape the

heaviness of the knower/learner roles. The objects we meet form a material bridge (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983) and sometimes a buffer between us – neither mine nor theirs they make an in-between space – and give us something tangible to gather round and connect over at the feminist ‘dinner’ table. We form (dis) attachments together and against one another to oral histories, fragments of wool stitched by collective hands at Greenham Common, pamphlets from Chile, Palestine and Singapore, UK periodicals such as *Mukti: Asian Women’s Magazine* and *Shocking Pink* and Bristol’s local Women’s Liberation newsletters; we open ourselves up to being moved within the same space, sharing the different times immanent to each archival fragment. Through bumpy textures created by typewritten minutes of the Bristol Women’s Refuge, complete with pen erasures and typos, we are afforded a kind of proximate intimacy with its authors by inhabiting the temporal labour of the artefact’s creation, reminded of the constantly unfinished and imperfect nature of their/our work.

The archives reshape the students–teachers’ engagement with one another, inviting them in knowledge-making that is emotionally demanding; its affective intensity diffused by the invited guest of honour, that unique repository of rage, exhaustion and desire that is the feminist archive. Maybe the separate space and preciousness of the archive – a basement where only pencils are allowed and bags left at the door – encourages us to take particular care both of the material and each other in this process, but it is difficult to measure as such. The materials captivate us; we open up to their wonder, we start to wonder what else we can find. When working with the archive in this way, we can work out how we can *critically engage* with our affective responses without knowing in advance what they will be.

But wonder is not always enchanting, and often it is the uncomfortableness of the archive that activates. Hemmings speaks of this as affective dissonance, for her the desire for transformation arises out of the experience of discomfort:

Feeling that something is amiss in how one is recognised, feeling an ill fit with social descriptions, feeling undervalued, feeling that same sense in considering others; all these feelings can produce a politicized impetus to change that foregrounds the relationship between ontology and epistemology precisely because of the experience of their dissonance. (2012, 150)

In order to know differently, therefore, we have to feel differently. Does the archive offer us unique access to these kinds of transformational, onto-epistemological (Barad 2007) entanglements? This is not to say that other feminist materials are less likely to provoke emotions – but our own and the students’ encounters were characterized by affective responses we had not known elsewhere. Prior to such exposure, we did not know we could feel this way.

Such wonder-filled engagements can also be markedly pleasurable. The connection between pleasure and politicization is echoed in research where students describe their experiences of learning as intensely pleasurable, highlighting the significance of moments of intellectual *jouissance* as necessary for enacting change. Describing the pleasure of learning as orgasmic challenges, the vision of undergraduate students as anti-intellectual, disembodied and primarily engaged in education for utilitarian ends (Hughes, Perrier, and Kramer 2009). Lekkie Hopkins has also argued, drawing on Luce Irigaray, that working with wonder and generosity are key principles of a passionate pedagogy that recognizes similarity and difference (2009):

We are drawn by curiosity, by wonder, to something new precisely because of its difference. Generosity, by contrast, involves seeing others as essentially similar to ourselves.

Mobilizing wonder and generosity enables students to encounter each other differently but also to engage with the archives in the spirit of respect. The feel of a shawl from the Greenham Common particularly conveyed a respectful yet intimate encounter. People gasped as it was removed carefully from its box. Its colour and spider web patterns brought out a desire not just to be near it but to touch it – because it feels like you are not usually allowed – to get inside/among the very fabric of the archive while still being incredibly aware of its fragility. Being able to touch a non-textual object brought out an additional dimension to the knowledge companions here: the sensory part of one’s awakening to the complex wonders of feminism. We found that though wonder is present in many feminist and other classrooms, what happened within the archives was for us different because of our *physical proximity* – the touching of the artifacts enabled us to explore a different relation between knowing and feeling and to create a different relational space (Eichorn 2014). Turning the pages, listening to the voices, rambling through the very different remains afforded multiple access points to ideas, practices and actions that are so often reduced to singular narratives, which serve to flatten the dynamism and life of feminist history and its potential to act as both pedagogical and epistemological resource.

Feeling differently and dwelling

Conveying to students that the way in which they respond to texts affectively is a legitimate part of knowledge production requires engaging them in critical reflection on how feelings – what attracts as well as what disgusts – are made socially. The sensory wonder of the archives enables an exploration of the interface between ontology and epistemology, as well as a deeper kind of knowing between students and teachers. In such a radical space for (un) learning, the subordinate place of feelings and sensations can perhaps find a home inside the feminist archives. Ensuring that feminist archives are *used*

and *valued* as resources for teaching and research is one very pragmatic step to achieve this.

Part of the aim then for creating space(s) to practice this pedagogy further is to do precisely this, ensuring there is enough time for such encounters to unfold without metric pressures and assessment. Co-learners need time to dwell in the feminist archive, to make mistakes, find their way and record their insights – insights that can be affective-cognitive-perceptual, concrete or speculative. Due to the unique status of feminist archives at the time of writing (2014–2015), where what has been written about their contents is trusted and cited far more than the actual (often dismissed) contents, it is a rich site for exploring the processes whereby knowledge claims are produced, secured and challenged. It is a site where learners can feel and know differently when confronted with the disjuncture and contradiction between what they have learnt or inherited about feminism, and what they discover. This may create awareness that the field of knowledge production is always a *struggle*, that is, something that cannot be taken-for-granted as static facts and therefore can be challenged and changed, by them, should they want to. We are interested, first and foremost then, in recording responses of the archival encounter, paying particular attention to what we thought we knew (inherited images, narratives and impressions) and what we found out. If there were dissonances, then why? What feelings does this produce? Does this archive disorient our assumed knowledge yet orient us in other, emergent, as yet-to-be-named ways? Equally, when assumptions are affirmed, how does that make us relate to the contents of this particular feminist archive? All these factors are essential in feeling our way through the knowledge terrain of the feminist archive, in being open to opening its contents – to being affected in the process.

As well as suggesting that the feminist archive provides a radical space for collaborative unlearning, we also suggest that not only teachers but also students can become custodians of the archive. Such active custodianship starts very simply with an ethic of attention, respect and care we described (which is not the same as uncritical devotion that erases mistakes) in engaging with the archives, and is an invitation to critical listening, looking and touching which can provoke different relations between feeling and knowing. As Maria Puig de la Bellacasa writes: ‘But though we do not know in advance what world is knocking, inquiring into how we can care will be required in how we will relate to the new’ (2012, 212), **to what emerges**. Donna Haraway has explored the idea of cross-species companionship (2008) and we want to expand this notion to think to about how the affect-infused inanimate objects of the feminist archive can create interactions specifically enriching of our learning. We have argued in this article how this is possible: that archival materials work as knowledge companions that can open us up to different kinds of affective knowledge from disorientation to wonder and **AQ7** fascination: ‘Far from being silent companions, objects infuse learning with libido’ (Turtle 2007, 309). Such an approach also reconfigures the relational space of feminist pedagogy: we observed that it opened the student–teacher relationship towards including others, other things and other historical times. Such an opening inside the feminist classroom decentres the teacher and requires a different kind of sharing, where ignorance and vulnerability have a place in learning.

Companionship also conveys that students can build embodied and affective relationships to the objects of their inquiry that go beyond intellectual curiosity. Learning that is sensorially connected to the world that surrounds us provokes different kinds of encounters. Our call to turn towards archives as knowledge companions – or simply spend time in them *together*, with our students and knowledge-opening communities – forms part of a wider attempt to make different/dissident teaching spaces within and outside the academy (Amsler and Neary 2012; Lambert 2012). These interventions take sensory and affective engagement seriously. They refuse to treat students as education consumers and insist on engaging-with them as research collaborators. We hope our reflections will stimulate further discussion in critical pedagogy and feminism more widely about how to create ethical spaces where transformative and self-actualizing learning can be practiced.

We have argued that there are three reasons why the feminist archive is an important resource which incites us to practice both feminist epistemology and pedagogy differently. Firstly, it enables us to shift our focus on the process of knowledge production because for those ‘schooled’ within particular modes of feminist storytelling (Hemmings 2011), what is encountered in the archive can challenge the authority and coherence of those stories, and therefore produce feelings of disorientation. Secondly and relatedly, our approach places feelings at the centre of encounters with knowledge because of the mutual entanglement of thinking and feeling rendered salient in the feminist archive. Finally, and again relatedly, these processes facilitate different kinds of student–teacher collaboration, with students positioned as co-researchers working to document and interpret the feelings, knowledge and transformations that emerge from the encounter-with the feminist archive. Our overall claim is that the archive enriched and reshaped the practice of feminist pedagogy. The objects we encountered worked as knowledge companions to stimulate collaborative (un)learning and to produce unique forms **AQ8** of affective knowledge.

Disclosure statement

AQ9 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. As it is described on the Feminist Archive South website <http://feministarchivesouth.org.uk/about/>
2. The scholar in question was paid (on an hourly basis) to facilitate these workshops. We make this distinction between the different labour contexts of the scholars because the reviewer of the article asked us to, assuming somewhat that we were both 'feminist academics', and that who we were, and our different attachments to the archive could be summarised in a short sentence. We are grateful to be given the opportunity to make the distinction apparent to the reader, although doing justice to these different contexts, and the wider, unpaid or underpaid labour that contributes to the caretaking of feminist and other 'radical' archives, is a subject worthy of extended reflection and cannot be covered in-depth here.
3. These issues are covered in detail in Deborah Withers (2015).
4. See also the project *Using Archives to Teach Gender*. <http://gender-archives.leeds.ac.uk/>.

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